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Simple Escape

Rosalyn Orr

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by Rosalyn Orr

I wouldn't be surprised if you already know how my story ends. It was in all the papers, even on Fox News and CNN. First they showed my picture and asked for any information about my disappearance or whereabouts. When the whole story was revealed, news analysts said my quest for a simple life represented a popular trend carried to extremes, a naïve vision gone awry.

Once upon a time, I wished for a simple life. Is there such a thing? My life is complex; the world is a staggering complexity. Maybe I've done the best I could. I don't know. Now I'm here, where a measure of simplicity is imposed, but this isn't what I hoped for.

I was very good at living my old life. Cocktail parties were a breeze. I didn't always have something new to wear, but otherwise, I was flawless. Old men laughed at my jokes, gave me compliments. I delved into discussions and easily transitioned from group to group. Those who didn't know me had known my parents and sang their praises, some claiming responsibility for getting them together on their first blind date. In no time, I got high from the physical closeness of the attendees and from the gushing flattery I received and returned. Two glasses of red wine would last an hour and a half, at which point the crowd would thin, I'd hug the hostess good night, breathing in her perfume, feeling her powdery cheek brush against mine. Mark stood waiting. My arms would slide into the slick lining of the coat he held for me; it felt cold on my shoulders. Our dress shoes click-clacked as we walked arm in arm down the street toward our car, waving at the headlights of a departing Lexus.

Once, on the way home from such an event, Mark said, "Nancy, thank you for being such a good wife. I watched you tonight from across the room, saw you laugh and smile. Everyone loved you tonight. You make me proud."

I should have known what I was getting into from the beginning. When I was 24, seeing Mark but not yet engaged, I even had a vision of my future. I was driving down Glenwood Avenue one late afternoon, on my way home from the school where I taught. In the vision, black men dressed in white jumpsuits carried two golf bags apiece through the blue-green shadows of a late summer afternoon. They stopped, swung the bags from their shoulders, and placed them at the lip of a bunker. I heard the clink of metal as the clubs resettled in the bag, and I could smell fresh-cut grass. A golf cart whined, and the driver punched his foot on the brake and approached a caddy who held a club in his outstretched hand.

The vision seemed a preview of the inevitable, and it made me deeply sad. I didn't want the only people of color in my life to be working at the country club. Tears ran down my face as I tried to maneuver my Honda Civic into the right lane. The car behind me reemerged from a blind spot in my rearview mirror just as the driver laid on his horn. I jumped and swerved. At the next exit, I pulled in the parking lot of a strip mall, wiped tears from my face and glasses, and waited to regain my composure.

I loved feeling connected to Mark. I knew we'd marry, and I could stop staying home alone or going out to crowded, smoky bars where people ordered Sex on the Beach or Long Island Iced Tea. We'd have children, and he'd take good care of me. But I hated feeling connected to Mark. I would enter marriage as I'd entered school, social clubs, relationships. I appeared to embrace my position, but a silent part of me held back. I would accept all that came with my marriage: parties, gifts of cachepots and crystal, the new neighbors, the country club. I'd accept it with charm and grace. But all the while, one arm would flail blindly about on the outside, looking for something to cling to.

Once when Mark came to visit me in Raleigh,

Photograph by Erin Nagel

he picked me up at my apartment, and we drove across town to see one of my students play soccer. My knobby knees sticking out of shorts looked out of place against the black leather of his car's interior. The car still had the new smell. We sat in the grass next to the field. We'd just had our first few warm days, and already the grass was getting thicker and greener. It tickled my legs. I looked up at Mark. His dark hair shone in relief against the clear sky, and his blue eyes were so big. I thought I'd never seen anything so perfect. I wanted to hold his face in my hands.

Mark said things to me I couldn't believe. I thought he could see the small tomboy with thick glasses sitting askew on her face, wearing her brother's hand-me-down jeans. But I wasn't that person anymore, or at least to him I didn't appear to be. When we were driving around town on a Sunday, looking for a good place to get a turkey sandwich, he steered with one hand and folded the long fingers of the other hand around mine. His hand was strong, soft, and warm. If he needed to, he could even steer with his knee so he wouldn't have to let go of me. He kept holding my hand as we ate our sandwiches at a picnic table outside the crowded restaurant full of college kids. His was turkey on white toast with brown mustard. "Nancy, you are beautiful," he said.

Funniest of all, Mark seemed attracted by the very things that I feared would turn him away. He liked to point out the things that made me different from other girls he knew. "You don't talk about the things girls talk about," he'd say. "You don't wear any makeup! Your ears aren't pierced. You

don't care how you look!" He smiled as he noted these things and shook his head incredulously.

Of course, Mark and I did marry. I saw the caddies from my vision when I looked out of the kitchen window of our new home onto the Donald Ross-designed golf course.

We had three children right away—bam, bam, bam. Markie, Tommy, and Robert. There were some lovely simple things about newborns. I could contentedly do nothing all day but hold my baby. At night, I slept with each new child and scooped him up the moment he cried. If the baby didn't go right back to sleep after nursing, we wandered through the dark, shadowy house. I sang to the babies the same songs my mother used to sing to me.

Robert was born in the winter of record-setting snow and ice storms. While the rest of the house slept, we stood at the window and watched the snow accumulate and grow into a tall cylinder on a patio table. We watched snow thicken on the cedar tree, bending its branches into a mournful shape, until it fell in clumps, leaving holes that looked like the footprints of a mysterious creature.

My family and acquaintances will tell you my trouble began in the summer of 2004. That was the first time there were any outward indications of the plan in my mind. The plan to return to simplicity. Truly, the problem started in the beginning, when I came to be in my mother's womb, when my heart and soul and disposition were in their primordial state. It started when my brain was wired to think too much and notice the wrong details and send disturbing images straight to my heart—it started then and carried forward until I finally acted with purpose, instead of letting my life go as others thought it should. Instead of allowing things to happen to me, I made something happen.

When I stopped nursing the boys, and they all went off to school every day, I began to look around. How did this stuff accumulate so quickly, I wondered: a house with four bedrooms, four baths, six sofas, two TVs, needlepoint rugs, secretaries, sideboards, and sconces? Cars, big expensive gas-guzzlers. I didn't want the stuff. I didn't want to be with someone who did. When I realized that my boys had come to believe that this was the only way to live, I felt heavy, stuck, paralyzed. All I did each day for weeks was sit in one spot from the time Mark and the boys left until the first returned. Sometimes I sat on the uneven brick steps leading from the patio to the yard. The print of the brickwork stayed smashed into the backs of my thighs for hours. Most often I was on my bed. I started upright, propped on pillows, until I eventually slid down and curled into a sleeping position. Before I slept, I studied the muted light seeping through the closed blinds.

The days passed with remarkable speed as I thought about my possessions. I tried to imagine a change, envisioning the days of living alone in a two-room basement apartment when I was just out of college. I spent my days teaching severely disabled children and returned home exhausted but happy. My few pieces of furniture came from yard sales. If it couldn't fit in the hatchback of my Honda, it didn't come home. I spent my free time reading and walking. I trekked across miles and miles of shady, hilly neighborhood streets. It was enough for me.

I tried to explain to Mark my need to think about the less fortunate, my desire to simplify our lifestyle. But Mark worked so hard and needed tangible measures of his success. On an April Friday night, we sat on the terrace at the Club watching the sun set over the golf course. It was more than pleasant: the air was warm and soft, not stifling; the scotch tasted just right. It was just the kind of moment that tugged at me, pressing all the melancholy of the world into me. I had Mark's undivided attention. I didn't say, "It's beautiful. I love you. Thank you for being with me tonight."

Instead I said, "Remember the woman who slept on the street outside our hotel the last time we were in New York?" It was a six-month-old

memory. "I'm worried about her now."

We had nearly tripped over her as she curled her thin body over the subway vent where she had settled for the night.

Mark placed his drink down on the wrought-iron table. He said, "Please don't, Nancy. You're a good person. You deserve to be happy."

Eventually, the terrace filled up with acquaintances who would laugh and not worry about fixing the world. So Mark joined in the merriment, but he saw the sorrow on my face when he dared to check on me, and he worried even if he didn't understand.

Now, again, I sit still for most of the day. Even though I sleep more, 12 hours a day at least, the time awake seems longer than it did when I was making my plans. I have my books again. In fact, the library here, a one-room affair, is named for its benefactor, Ginger Godfrey, whom I once knew well. We were in bridge club together when I still excelled at acting out my part in the country club life. She was sharp, a good player, and I always hoped to be her partner when we met in the Club parlor. I was amazed at her ability to relate detailed stories about neighbors spouse-swapping or multi-couple hot tub escapades, sucking us right into her drama while she deftly won the bidding. Godfrey Library has some good titles. The problem is, I can rarely stay awake when I start reading. I've tried skipping a dose of my meds to help me get through a book, but if the story contains a hint of melancholy, I begin to cry. Just a few tears at first, but it grows to uncontrollable wails. I can never manage to stop before Joyce, the regular day nurse, comes in to check on me.

"Nancy, have you been reading those upsetting novels again?" she'll say. "You know it's not good for you."

On one spring morning, when the boys were at school and the house was quiet, I sat outside on the brick steps, elbows on bent knees and my chin resting in the palms of my hands. From that spot, I saw ivy curl and twist its greedy tendrils around the branches of the blooming azaleas—evidence of my negligence, of the deterioration my sitting around had caused. I stood and made one lap around the yard, feeling the sun on my back. The air was fresh and clear; I felt it pushing me along and whispering to me, "Do it. Do it." Was it the spring air getting into my lungs and then my blood? Or had the thoughts just had time to germinate while I silently waited for weeks?

Minutes later, in the kitchen, I phoned the church to arrange a pickup for the following day of all our sofas, some chairs, and tables. The next call: the Salvation Army to schedule a clothes pickup. When I was on hold for customer service with the cable company—I had planned to cancel service—I heard the squeak of the back screen door. I hung up. The clock on the microwave showed nearly noon. No one was expected. Mark entered. He had a meeting downtown and had just enough time to make a sandwich. The excitement of the calls had left me flushed.

"Everything okay?" Mark asked as he leaned in for a kiss. His silky tie brushed against my arm.

In ten minutes, he was on his way back out. "Remember, I have dinner out tonight. Golf is at nine on Saturday."

"Tommy has soccer tryouts this afternoon. If you think about it, call and tell him good luck," I said.

When Mark returned from work the following evening and saw the newly empty sunroom, I told him I'd sent the furniture out to be recovered. I'd even gone to a design shop and brought home a swatch of busy chintz to show him. "I like it," he said. "Have you thought about having curtains made, too?"

The next day, some rugs were gone as well, "to be cleaned," I lied.

I woke each day that spring with incredible vigor, fresh from dreams that made vivid the next steps of the plan. I no longer wanted to sit; I wanted to act, and it was as though an instruction manual

materialized, telling me what to do. On weekday mornings, I urged the boys to eat more breakfast and checked their bags for homework folders. They were noisy on their way out, Markie teasing Tommy because his hair stuck up, Robert complaining that he didn't need a sweatshirt. I could barely wait for them to clear out before I started work on my own backpack. I started in on peanut butter sandwiches, making ten and wrapping each individually in Saran Wrap. I laid out other things: apples, bananas, single servings of applesauce. Then I arranged the food in a small day pack that I had for occasional mountain hikes.

South Oak, one street away from the house, led downtown. It was a 40-minute walk that took me first by grand historic houses, past the funeral home, by Phil's Diner, where someone was usually taking coffee at the sidewalk table, past parking decks, then through the corridor of tall buildings in the gleaming business district. They created welcome shade as the days grew warmer. Then the shadows grew short as the buildings became squat and sparse and tumbledown at the very edge of town. I learned which street corners, side streets, and alleys were frequented by the homeless. On the first outing, three men accepted sandwiches. Then I walked home, sat on the front stoop, and waited for the boys' bus.

On subsequent trips, the needy people who showed up in larger numbers began to call me by name. Most of them gave me skeptical sideways glances and spoke little. One man, Reggie, was eager to talk. He was about 55 with a scruffy gray beard and big, round, watery eyes and thick eyelashes that were moistly clumped together. He wore many layers of grimy clothes. His faded navy work pants didn't reach the top of his boots. The boots had no laces so they slid on and off of Reggie's ankles as he walked. He told me about construction jobs he'd had in that very part of town, how sad it was for him to watch it crumble. In his shirt pocket, he carried a worn deck of cards. We started playing gin rummy most of the times I saw him. I didn't dare complain to Reggie. I told him only good things: how well Robert reads, how Markie looks just like his father, some of the lessons I learned from my mother before she died. Wasn't it all true, the good things I described? I didn't tell him how I wanted my life to change. Often he told me about his grown son, who had a beautiful family of his own and who would eventually come for him when he had established himself.

In the meantime, he said, "Nancy, you are a blessing from the Almighty Lord. On Judgment Day, he will remember how you fed Reggie and kept Reggie company."

When Mark got the call from his friend saying I'd been spotted "with the crack addicts on the Southside," he left a meeting, claiming an emergency, drove the 20 miles from his office to town, and cruised the streets until he found me and picked me up. The deteriorated part of town I frequented had become a hot spot for investors who grabbed up cheap property to refurbish as upscale, trendy boutiques, restaurants, and town homes. A few brightly-colored, gaudy awnings of the newest establishments stood out amid the bleakness. The call was from a friend of Mark, interested in buying some real estate, who had spotted me. I'm sure Mark's first concern was for my physical safety. Even when we were just dating, Mark called me at night to make sure I'd locked my apartment. Often, I felt like an overprotected child. At times, it was wonderfully reassuring to know that he would take care of me, that he cared so much for my well-being, but it also caused me to lie about my actions to keep him from interfering.

We were on the corner of Oakview and Pine when I climbed into his cool, cavernous sedan. Mark immediately pushed the automatic lock button. He didn't get angry. His eyes glistened with a hint of tears, something I'd only seen twice before, when his father died and when Little Mark was born.

"Nancy, you don't know what these people could do to you. You could be hurt or killed. Then what would I do? What would the boys do? I know

there are better ways for you to help."

Mark had seen me desperately upset before. He didn't understand why I cried, why I felt so helpless. He blamed my behavior on depression and tried to get me help. I had seen a doctor and taken anti-depressants for a time. But I never stopped believing that being upset over real problems was not mental illness.

After my trips downtown abruptly ended, I stayed home for a while. Mark took some days off work, surely to keep an eye on me. Again, I looked around at the house, the cars, the surrounding houses. It made me physically ill to consider the money circulating around amongst the people, myself included. I stopped answering the phone or returning phone calls. I spent some days curled in a ball on the bathroom floor, grasping at my tangled intestines, unable to ease the pain. I could smell Pine-Sol. The bath mat left tiny craters imprinted across my forehead, making it look like the surface of a child's playground ball. A few blocks away and all around the world were huge, aching craters of human misery and need. We floated about mindlessly, sated. How could it be justified?

There were brief pockets of time when I forgot how much we'd paid for the house or how many people could be housed sufficiently for the same amount. Or at least I was able to push those thoughts back and let them become slightly hazy. Then I played with the boys for hours in the backyard on those spring and summer evenings. Football, baseball, ghost-in-the-graveyard, anything they wanted. The play always came to a climax as the sun sank behind the horizon, the grass began to feel slightly cool under bare feet, and the first lightning bugs appeared at the darkest edge of the yard, hovering low, near the hedge. We'd abandon the game and catch the glowing bugs. Robert was amazed he could do it. If Tommy exaggerated about how many he caught, Markie was generous and let him get away with it.

Then we would lie back in the grass and watch the first stars appear. After I finally got the boys to bed, while Mark stepped into their rooms to say good night, I would go back out to check the stars, hoping to find the same reassurance I remember my mother claiming that the predictable constellations gave her.

The sofas didn't return. More furniture disappeared. My stories about cleaning and redecorating would soon become transparent, I feared. I assured Mark that during our vacation to the beach, new, improved furniture would be installed, and the house would be returned to order.

The first week of August was traditionally our beach week. We'd been going to Pawley's Island since Little Mark was a baby. This year, the trip presented an opportunity for me. The new furniture would be arriving on the morning of our departure, I told Mark. He and the boys should start on without me. I'd supervise the decorators.

The week before we were to leave, I went to the Southside, desperately wanting to locate Reggie. I went to the usual spots downtown, where I was told he'd moved on; I might find him under the bridge at Westover and Meadowbrook, a completely different part of town. I took the car. Westover Avenue was my least favorite place to go. It was lined with car dealerships, strip malls, and giant discount stores. The bits of property that weren't developed had been bulldozed to fields of red clay that eventually would be covered with asphalt.

Even in my often-drugged state, I doubt the image of Reggie's home under the bridge will fade in my mind. I took the Meadowbrook exit, parked at a gas station, and shuffled down part of the steep embankment. Traffic was whizzing by 12 feet below. I got onto all fours to steady myself and peered under the bridge. I climbed toward what appeared to be a pile of wooden planks and called for Reggie. The earth was noticeably cooler under the bridge.

"Who's there?"

"It's me. Nancy."

"Well, the Lord does work in mysterious ways. I didn't think I'd see you again. Come right in."

Plywood had been fitted together to form three walls that reached to the bottom of the bridge, which worked as the ceiling of the shelter. The walls were built step-wise, forming triangles that fit snugly into the slope of the embankment. A roughly rectangular hole was left for a crawl-through door. A dirty, ragged yellow blanket hung over the opening. The final wall was a rusted steel beam, a support for the bridge that reached almost to the ground. Large pieces of cardboard of varying sizes covered the dirt floor. The cardboard slid under me as I crawled.

"The floor still needs some work," Reggie acknowledged. "You're gonna get pretty muddy." He spoke over the constant roar of traffic.

Several crumpled blankets were strewn across the tiny living space, as were Styrofoam cups, fast-food wrappers, bottles, shopping bags, clothes, and a small radio. The combination of damp earth and dirty clothes made the place smell of wet dog, like the collie mix I had smelled as a child after he'd been rolling in the mud puddles on a summer day, then lazed in the sun while the dirty clumps of fur dried.

Reggie gave me a searching look. I told him I hadn't brought anything, but I had what I hoped he would think was good news. I told of the beach vacation, that I planned to leave the back door of the house unlocked, that I hoped he'd stay there while we were away, to come and go at night so as not to alarm the neighbors.

"There are six people staying in this hut. They'd appreciate the extra space."

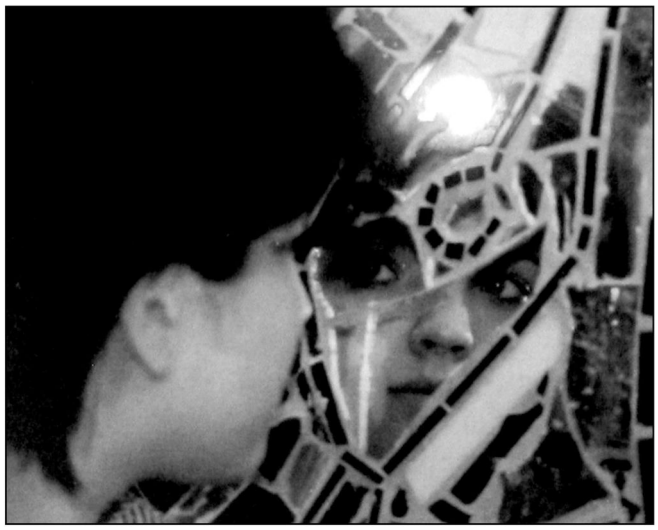
It didn't look to me like six people could fit at one time.

From my pocket, I pulled a small, creased piece of paper on which I'd drawn a map to my house for Reggie.

"Reggie!" A shrill cry came from outside the enclosure. "Who's in there? Who you talking to?" There was cold, clear anger in the woman's voice.

"It's a friend, Clarice," Reggie answered.

Clarice was a young dark-skinned woman with a tightly drawn face and uneven eyes. Even though she'd clearly been living on the streets, her complexion was remarkably smooth. Over the richly colored skin of one cheekbone, a raised, black shiny scar crossed and stretched toward her lips. She pulled back the fabric door and spoke to Reggie as she looked at me.



Photograph by Erin Nagel

"We don't have any friends who don't live on the street. Don't you know that by now, Reggie? She better get her ass out."

I looked to Reggie once, then scrambled out as Clarice moved to give me space. My face was burning. I looked down. Clarice coughed hard, deep in her chest, and spit a big greenish wad of phlegm at my feet.

"Bitch," she hissed to my back.

My remaining chore was to go to the bank. After requesting to see my balance, I withdrew 5,000 dollars for myself. Then I wrote a check to the city's biggest homeless shelter for an amount large enough to deplete my account and mailed it off.

Again I readied my small pack, this time putting in toiletries and a change of clothes: long khaki pants, white T-shirt, sandals, one sweater, underclothes, and socks. I wore shorts and running shoes. There was nothing left to do but get started. Certainly, part of me thought the journey ahead was impossible. Even if I departed the town and the

state anonymously, which was my intention, I could not envision where and how I would end up: in a house, a tent, alone, with new friends? Would I survive at all? I only knew I was doing no good at home. I was able to do no good for the people around me. If I stayed, I would only dwell on my unworthiness. If I had been a gutsier person, maybe I would have ended it completely that day.

Passing through the neighborhood on the walk out to the highway, I greeted acquaintances. Peggy Brooks was out strolling her new baby. Alice Mitchell pulled her Suburban over to ask which of the second-grade teachers I would recommend. I answered as my heart pounded, then my feet carried me on somehow, as if by a shaky but determined will of their own.

On the highway, I tried to stay as far from the traffic as possible by walking in the stiff, stubbly grass of the shoulder. Even so, each passing truck blew a hot, dusty gust in my face. Diesel fumes poisoned the air. After an hour hitchhiking, I was picked up by a trucker headed south. The driver introduced himself as Glenn. He looked too skinny and frail to handle an 18-wheeler. This was my first test. If Glenn could accept me as a genuine hitchhiker without too many questions, I'd be off to a good start at bluffing my way through the rest of the trip. He'd take me as far as Atlanta, which seemed fine. I just wanted a city with an airport.

It was while I was bumping along with Glenn, chewing the sunflower seeds he offered, that I realized my first mistake. I couldn't get on an airplane. I'd have to show ID; then my trail could be traced. I considered telling Glenn I was a runaway and asking him where he could take me to disappear. Maybe he knew of a tiny settlement that he passed through on his trips; maybe he even lived in some deserted area where I could hide. But I didn't say anything. We were mostly quiet as I watched the roadside landscape slip past the high window of the cab. Occasionally, during the five-hour drive, Glenn pulled out and offered another snack.

When we reached the outskirts of Atlanta, the sky was showing the first peachy colors of twilight. Glenn took the exit nearest the center of town. From there, I got directions to the bus station, where I pored over a map of all routes from Atlanta and possible connections. The eventual route took me 100 miles over 12 hours. North from Atlanta to Gainesville, Cleveland, Blairsville, back across the state line to Murphy, Andrews, and finally Topton. I chose Topton because it was on the Nantahala River and adjacent to the Appalachian Trail; that seemed appealing. Despite rafting the Nantahala several times, I'd never heard of Topton, so I knew it had to be small.

The bus left the Atlanta station at 10:00 p.m. That was the only true station I saw. In other towns, the bus stopped at seemingly random convenience stores. I arrived in Topton at 10:15 in the morning.

The town proper was aligned on one street that curved along the edge of the river. It looked like a tourist town minus the tourists. One and a half blocks had storefronts side by side, most with benches or rockers out front, most with bold signs: BBQ Here, Hot Dogs Cold Beer, River Rides, Visit Whistling Falls, Street Dance Sat Nite. There was one inn, perched above the shops on the hillside, and one motel. I went straight for Stone's Motel, which sat on the river side of the street. The door was open, and a counter looked to serve as a reception desk, but it was dark and quiet except for the blue glow of a muted TV mounted on the wall behind the counter. I rang a bell and waited. A wide, strong woman with straight black hair flowing well past her shoulders came out holding a steaming mug.

"Help ya?" Her voice was deep and gravelly. She didn't smile. Her complexion was olive. It was weathered and dark. A photograph on the counter showed her standing on rocks wearing rubber boots and displaying five trout on a line.

"I'm hoping for a room," I said.

"Well, then. I'm Stella Stone. Welcome to Stone's. Got no TV and no AC in the rooms, but the view makes up for it. If you need to catch up with your shows, you can watch them in here."

A special single had a mini-refrigerator and a hot plate for $39.50 per night or $240 for a week. After she showed me the room, I said I'd keep it for the week. The room was actually part of a log cabin that sat 20 feet from the river. A cluster of small buildings made up the rest of the motel. In the room were two single beds, a nightstand with the hot plate in the spot where a lamp might go, and a narrow dresser. One window with nearly transparent white curtains was beside the door. The light in the bathroom was a single bulb with a pull-string. An old tub stood on claw feet and was the first thing I used. There was plenty of hot water. I made it so hot I had to ease myself in, and my skin immediately turned pink. Resting my head on the cool porcelain, I stayed still and concentrated on the steam rising and the feel of my body being buoyed up.

After I put on my clean set of clothes, I washed the other set in the sink and added them to what appeared to be a communal clothesline. I ordered pizza and milk from the restaurant next door and sat by the river on a broad rock bathed in afternoon sun to eat. The water was loud as it splashed and rushed over and around rocks. I watched dead leaves gently float over unbroken water, then get caught in the churning shoots between rocks where they were sucked under and dispelled at the bottom of miniature falls. At the coast, the roar of the water was louder. The same afternoon sun shone there at a slightly lower angle. I imagined my family there at the beach, but of course they had already left to go in search of me.

Before I went back to my room, I bought some food at a small grocery on the main drag less than a block away. Then I settled in for the afternoon and night. I was completely taken with my half of the cabin and loved the fact that it was mine for a week. With the door and window open, I could hear the calls of children and fishermen as they tried to be heard above the noise of the current. The place would have been my type of paradise if I could have stopped thinking.

Next morning, I was up early and walked along the shoulder of the narrow road winding in and out of Topton in search of a trailhead. After a mile on the road, I found a trail and was immediately enclosed in a thicket of cool rhododendron, its deep red, gnarled branches twisting around me. The trail was peaty, and thick carpets of moss grew along the edge. Switchbacks cut across the steeply rising hill. Where the rhododendron ended, a stand of hemlock began, and then the trail became temporarily unmarked as it crossed a large outcropping of rock. Then into a hardwood forest, the grade became more gradual, with slight rises and falls in the overall ascent. At the summit, a posted wooden sign identified the spot as Loblolly Lookout. Arrowed signs underneath named each direction of the now dividing trail: Mooney Gap Trail and Muskrat Creek Trail. I chose Muskrat Creek and hiked further in for another hour. Had I brought food, I would have gone further, but the hiking made me hungry, and I turned around.

I had no trouble retracing my route. I returned to the cabin and ate two tuna sandwiches. For awhile, I rested inside, then went to the office to see if Stella had any trail maps. When I approached the office, only the screen door was closed, so I could hear excited talking coming from inside. I stepped in to find a small group gathered: Stella, the waitress from the pizza place, and some others whom I didn't recognize. When they saw me enter, they immediately fell silent and looked down or away from me and dispersed.

"What can I do for ya?" Stella asked.

"I'm hoping you have some trail maps."

"I'm glad you stopped in. I want to talk with you. Let's sit."

She motioned for me to come around the counter and turned two chairs so they were facing. She glanced around the room, then we sat.

"I had the TV on this afternoon. You were on the news. I saw your picture plain as day. A lot of people are looking for you. They think you've been kidnapped or worse. Now," she sighed heavily, "I'm not going to mention your being here if I'm not asked, but most everyone will recognize you

soon, so I'd advise you to move on if you want to stay hidden."

I hadn't spoken. My eyes filled with tears from her sternness and the shame of being found out. I didn't make any noise, but the tears seeped out and kept flowing, gathering in the nape of my neck. I wasn't trying to make her feel sorry for me, but I guess I did.

Stella's tone became authoritative. "Go to your room. I'll gather some provisions for you."

I sat at the end of my bed, not able to envision what would come next, and waited for Stella. An hour later, she brought a tent, a large pack, food, and a water bottle. In the pack, I also found a pocketknife, a parka, matches, a road map, and a trail map. She accepted 100 dollars for the supplies.

I decided to go to a place that was already a little familiar: back along the same trail I'd hiked that morning. Just before complete dark, I set up my tent in a level wooded area next to Muskrat Creek, which I saw from my map was a tributary of the Nantahala.

I stayed four days at my outpost by the creek. Mostly, I stayed near the tent. I took short walks right by the creek's edge or sat by the water tossing rocks. Sometimes I made myself count each rock as I threw it in to keep my thoughts on something simple and monotonous. One morning, I sat crouched in a sandy, pebbly spot, not moving even after my back and knees ached. I held onto a large root growing out of the side of the creek bed for balance and counted 600 stones as I threw them in.

Stella had given me plenty of food: oranges, bananas, dried fruit, and nuts. I snacked throughout the days and nights.

By pushing the thick layer of leaves on the forest floor away from the edges of my tent, I made a small clearing. Gradually, over the days, I made a boundary of sorts with fallen branches and rocks in a rough circle enclosing the tent. There was no reason for this barrier except that it gave me a constructive task and imposed a little order on my site.

Some individuals and groups passed by on the trail, which was 40 feet from the tent. If they saw me, I acknowledged them with a wave, but I tried to get in the tent and remain still until their voices faded. One hiker was accompanied by a yellow lab that came right over and sniffed me out and tried to enter the tent. He was whining and pawing at the zippered entrance when the owner summoned him back. For several days, I encountered little wildlife, mostly ants and mosquitoes, salamanders, and tiny darting fish. Rain came once, a gentle summer shower that lasted most of a day.

On the third day, I was lifting the end of a broad oak branch to pull to my makeshift wall, when I was startled by a small, coiled snake raising its head. It was harmless, but the curling shape and slithering tongue signaled danger nonetheless. I reminded myself that it was a tiny creature, not to fear, when I heard the unmistakable rattle. A bigger snake, the mother I assumed, appeared from under the log I still held, taking a serpentine path past the baby and toward me. Thin strips of skin were bare above my socks, exposed at the perfect height for deadly, striking fangs. The snake stopped moving forward but lifted its head and kept the rattle shaking. We both stared and didn't move, my muscles now coiled as tightly as the snake's. I imagined being bitten, tying a tourniquet around my leg, and crawling out of the wilderness.

"I'm not going to hurt you, snake, or your baby." My voice sounded strange here among the quiet trees. "I'll move right out of your way." Is a snake like a dog, I wondered; can it sense my terror?

I lowered the wood, noticing the vulnerable soft flesh on the inside of my arms, then backed up slowly. The snake didn't follow me.

Water was the first provision to be used up. Using my road map, I saw that there was another small settlement about six or eight miles northwest of Topton. I left everything but my day pack, went back to the road, and turned away from Topton, thinking I'd find someplace for water between the towns or walk to the next town at worst. Two miles

up, I found a small grocery that also appeared to be a tourist stop, as roadside tables held Indian headgear, T-shirts, caps, and the like.

The middle-aged man behind the register said, "Sure, hon. Fill up your bottles in the ladies' room."

I wondered what picture of me had been used on TV and how closely it resembled my current appearance.

In the bathroom, I washed my hands and arms with hot, soapy water and splashed water on my face, then filled my bottles. I bought some more food, including a Hershey's bar, which I stopped to open just outside the slamming screen door. A green minivan had pulled into the small gravel lot. A girl and a boy poured out of the vehicle and ran toward me as I stood at the entrance.

A woman rolled down the passenger-side window and called to them, "Just one thing!" They paused and looked back. Their eyes were bright with attention. "And go fast. We have ten minutes until baseball practice."

The boy, about nine, wore cleats, baseball pants, and an orange T-shirt with "Howie's Tigers" printed in black. The girl was younger, maybe seven, and wore cutoff jeans and sneakers with tube socks pulled high. When they reemerged with soft drinks, the man from inside followed them out.

"Hey Carol, hey Scott," he called to the car. The children climbed back in. He leaned toward the window. "Now, you practice hard. I'll be coming out to see you on Saturday."

"Bye, Howie!" The van pulled out.

I didn't realize I was staring until the man turned back to his store. I turned my gaze down. He strolled back and told me to come again.

I stumbled back a few steps. I put my things down and eased myself to the ground because, suddenly, I was woozy. There was scraggly grass growing up to the edge of the store, with bits of glistening broken glass sprinkled through it. Pieces of glass stuck to the palms of my hands. The sun had just broken through the haze, and light struck me in the face. I brushed glass from my hands and shaded my eyes.

I had one thought. The weight of it filled me. I felt it in my knees, which I couldn't bend. I felt it in my hipbones. The weight of my shoulders pulled me forward and down. The thought was even in my mouth, and I wanted to spit it out. My heavy shoulders began to heave and shudder. My body worked on its own, without my consent, as it shook and poured out tears and mucus. I heard myself making strange noises.

I observed my body's behavior, wondering what it would do next. I wanted to grab on to the thought. It was so clear, it must be tangible and solid.

Mark was right. Truly, I had a major mental problem. How else to explain? What I wanted and needed had just walked past me and then driven off in a green van. Who was that person who wanted to escape? I could barely recognize her in myself.

The image of the coiled snake came to mind. What if it had bitten me and I'd never seen my family again, if I had died without holding the boys again or seeing all their permanent teeth come in or singing more songs to them? What if I had never been able to tell Mark I love him again?

As quickly as my body had beaten itself down, it began to build up. My fingers were icy cold, but I felt something akin to warmth in my stomach. Little Mark's last baseball game of the season would be this weekend. Even if we'd been at the beach, we would have come home in time. If I left now, surely I could be home in time. Yes, I would be there. I'd stand with Mark right by the left field fence. Markie would be at shortstop. His white pants would be red from sliding into second or home. He'd pull his cap low, and curls of brown hair would fringe the edge. "Be ready, Markie!" Mark would call. Robert would sit on Mark's shoulders. Tommy would wander around, searching for good rocks for his collec-

tion. Mark would rub the back of my neck and smile at me.

I stood, ran in the store, and asked, "Howie, where can I catch a bus?"

"Top of the hill. By the post office."

Two hours later, I was heading northeast, toward home. I didn't go back for anything left at the campsite. I stared out the window with my nose touching the glass, but I don't remember seeing a thing. I was elated that my heart could feel this way after all.

At the first stop, I called home. No answer. Then Mark's cell phone, on which I left a message. "Mark. I'm coming home. I'll be at the bus station in five hours. I'm sorry." My body deflated as I said those words. "Oh, Mark, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. So sorry. I'm sorry, Mark."

Regret and fear consumed me. He couldn't forgive me. He couldn't understand. How could anyone understand my absurd actions?

The trip was long. I shifted about furiously in my seat, unable to contain my agitation. At each stop, I tried to call but only got recordings.

When the bus came to a stop in Salisbury, the engine idling loudly, the driver announced we would depart in ten minutes, next stop Greensboro—home. Enclosed in my sweaty fist was a stack of quarters for the phone. I only made it a few steps before I inadvertently glimpsed the day's edition of the newspaper displayed in a coin-operated machine. Something familiar. I looked again, closer. Reggie was pictured, looking tired and frightened in a mug shot. Already backing away, I read the headline: "Homeless Man Held for Questioning." I tried to steady myself enough to deposit the coins. I thought of Clarice, Reggie's roommate under the bridge, and how I had proved her right. I was no friend. All I had done was make him appear guilty of a heinous crime. When I was connected to the Greensboro police station, my voice sounded strange, croaky, and it hurt my throat to speak.

"You are holding an innocent man in the Nancy Lawrence case."

"Who's speaking?" a woman responded.

Silence.

"Ma'am, please identify yourself. Who is calling?"

She probably heard my raspy breathing as I gulped air and panicked.

"This is Nancy Lawrence." I hung up the phone.

That call tipped the police and the media to join Mark at the station for my arrival. To tell the truth, I don't remember much about the moments after I disembarked from the bus in Greensboro. I just remember I was barely able to walk, for fear was affecting me so, and the light in the station seemed blinding. I didn't know what I was stepping out into. The depot was crowded. People seemed to be pulsing toward the bus. I searched the sea of faces for Mark. I lost feeling in my fingers. Black spots appeared and expanded until they all ran together, blocking out images of men in uniform, flashing cameras, and finally, just before complete unconsciousness, Mark's anxious face. Some part of the formidable group gathered for my homecoming scooped me up and whisked me off to this hospital, where a room was being prepared for me.

The jury is still out on whether or not the treatment is working. Doctors say I'm severely depressed, to the point of psychosis. Of course I am. Now that I know where I need to be, I can't be with my family. I've been here for four months. We've had our first snow. Christmas is coming. Today, for the first time since the bus ride, I remembered, for a moment only, a bit of the light happiness and excitement I felt so strongly then, just at the beginning of the trip home, when all things still seemed possible. Mark, Markie, Tommy, and Robert are coming to visit today.

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